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VIRGIL AND THE DRAMA. PART I

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The modern reader wonders often at the almost entire lack of a drama in the Augustan Age, and regrets especially the loss of Ovid's *Medea* and the *Thyestes* of Varius, the only plays of the period, apparently, which impressed later critics as significant. Horace, in a passage which suggests an anti-Philistine diatribe of Matthew Arnold,¹ bewails the depraved taste of the popular audience, which resorted to the theatre to glut the eye, not to feed the understanding. It may be, indeed, that the plays of Ovid and Varius gained no general hearing at all, but were closet dramas, presented to a circle of friends at the *recitatio*. Yet admitting that the stage, as such, played no part in the development of contemporary poetry, the poets themselves, deeply versed in the different types of Greek literature, could not fail to draw inspiration from the Greek drama, whatever their opinion of the early dramatic art of their own countrymen. Horace's *Art of Poetry* is concerned mainly with the drama. Several of his odes are essentially dramatic in plan, and his Cleopatra, though treated in the compass of a single lyric, deserves a place with the heroines of tragedy. In his *Satires* Horace turns to a form of poetry which possibly was dramatic in origin, as the ancient critics believed, and at least suggested an affinity with the Greek old comedy in the boisterous gibes and racy wit of Horace's master Lucilius. Horace's relation to him is much like that of Menander to

Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae.

He mildens and refines; he makes the villain not less but more uncomfortable by illuminating his folly instead of cudgeling his guilt. He summons against his victims, not the Furies, but those comic imps who in our own generation owe chief allegiance to George Meredith. Surely the comic spirit comes to its own in the *Satires* of Horace; and great tragedy we find in Virgil.

¹ *Ep.* ii. 1. 187ff.

There are no indications in Virgil's early poems of dramatic genius or even a special interest in the drama. From the first his impulse was to epic. Like Milton, he cherished from his youth a great plan, destined to ultimate fulfilment after various attempts and changes of purpose. The epic on the Alban kings of Rome, on which the youthful Maro toiled

Ere warning Phoebus touched his trembling ears,

the inappropriate *Inferno* of the *Culex*—an *Inferno* at least as painful to the modern reader as to the mythical sinner of old—those failures discouraged Virgil for the time, but they led to the triumphs of his *Eclogues*. In Virgil's *Eclogues* we find a literary creation: pastoral they are in essence, *molles atque faceti*, and favored of the Muses who love the countryside, as Horace said of them, but breathing, too, a new spirit, the unmistakable touch of epic feeling, forever present in the undercurrent of Virgil's thought. A happy combination this, a daring feat he called it later, leading to countless imitations afterward, but not achieved again in the history of pastoral poetry until Milton. But hardly a touch of the dramatic is noticeable in Virgil's eclogues. Eclogues certainly contain dramatic elements in the dialogue and in the amoebaeon debate, and in the time of the Renaissance they developed into actual drama. The rustics of Theocritus are often intensely individual and various of his pastorals are essentially mimes. In Virgil, however, there is little attempt at dramatization, and only one eclogue, the eighth, is distinctly dramatic in structure. In the *Georgics*, too, though epic feeling surges through the whole poem and comes to absolute expression in the closing book, no dramatic development is apparent. But at some time before he began the *Aeneid*, Virgil had meditated profoundly on the problem of Greek tragedy.

I

Few readers can have failed to remark that the fourth *Aeneid* is essentially a tragedy, and in the Renaissance playwrights of various nationalities sought with indifferent success to reset the story into actual dramatic form. Such tragedies bear Dido's name as title and present her fate as the chief, if not the sole, dramatic motive. To most of these writers Aeneas is a shadowy figure, and, by impli-

cation, a villain, the more detestable for his *pietas*. Jodelle has more than the ordinary sympathy for Aeneas, yet the chorus condemns the hero in the end. To Marlowe, he is almost a comic villain. Such criticism was, of course, nothing new, and it did not cease with the Renaissance. Imogen's dreadful indictment that

True, honest men, being heard, like false Aeneas,
Were in his time thought false,

echoes the sentiment more mildly expressed in a mediaeval lament of the repentant Aeneas

*Non semper utile
est diis credere. . . .
nam instigaverunt
me te relinquere*

and is typical, too, of much that has been written on the fourth *Aeneid* in recent years. Mr. T. R. Glover remarks, in his *Studies in Virgil*,

In Dido's anguish it is written that the gods think more of seven hills beside a river than of human woe or of right and wrong. Here our tragedy fails and is untrue. On the side of Dido it is true, vividly and transparently true.¹

Certainly the tragedy fails if the hero is a scoundrel in disguise, if Aeneas is but another Theseus. The lament of an Ariadne, as in Catullus' beautiful poem, has room for intense pathos, but not for tragedy. The solution here is simple; the villain is punished, and the heroine is consoled. But punishment and consolation are unthinkable remedies for the *dénouement* of the fourth *Aeneid*. The reason is that the deep emotions and high ideals of Aeneas are, no less than Dido's passion and suffering, a part of Virgil's tragedy.

One cannot understand the plot of the fourth *Aeneid* apart from the books preceding. They are important not only for the main idea of the poem, but for the drama of the fourth book. In the first, the chief actors in this drama are presented. Dido, queenly and competent, yet ever the woman, immediately fascinates. Aeneas needs deeper study, but his character, once Virgil's meaning is grasped, is quite as clearly conceived. It is given in his address to his men at a moment of utter despair when, after the shipwreck, part of them have landed on a foreign shore.

¹ P. 190. An essentially similar treatment is given by N. W. DeWitt "The Dido Episode in the Aeneid of Virgil," *Class. Jour.* 1907, pp. 27 ff.

"Comrades—aye comrades, for no strangers are we ere this to woes—O ye who have suffered harder things, for these, too, heaven will ordain an end. Men, you have drawn near to Scylla's fury and her deeply echoing cliffs; you, too, have risked the Cyclops' stones. Call back your hearts and banish mournful fear. Haply, some day, this too will be pleasure to remember. Through diverse haps, through many a peril by the way, we push our course to Latium, where the fates show a resting-place secure; there, they decree, the realms of Troy shall rise again. Bear up, and keep yourselves for better days."

So spake his voice; sick with mighty cares, he wore hope on his face, and crushed the deep woe in his heart.¹

These are the words of a brave man of action who has encountered perils and knows sorrow, but who does not wear his feelings on his sleeve; his vision is set on the distant goal, which somehow he shall reach. Deep woe at heart, but mastery of emotion, supreme reserve and resolution—these are the fundamental traits of Aeneas' character. Virgil has taken a suggestion from the speech of Teucer in the splendid ode of Horace—if indeed that is the earlier poem—and both Dante and, following in his steps, Tennyson have in the words which their hero Ulysses addresses to his disconsolate men, caught again the spirit of Virgil's lines, and shown their understanding of his Aeneas. Virgil knew of a historical counterpart in the character of Julius Caesar, and he portrays his hero with the same masterly reserve with which the character of Julius Caesar is presented in Shakespeare.

Toward the end of the book, the plot of the drama is stated. When Aeneas and his attendant stand forth refulgent from the cloud,

obstupuit primo aspectu Sidonia Dido.

The artifice of Venus seems almost unnecessary; after it and before, the dramatic problem is revealed as Dido's passion and its relation to the hero's ideals. Following an accepted device of the dramatist, Virgil does not proceed at once to the solution of the problem, but now that the reader's interest is aroused, interposes other matter to lengthen the suspense. And yet Virgil's second book, though deferring the dramatic problem, is relevant to it. The purpose of the new narrative is to develop the character of the hero, as outlined in the first book. After the horror of the last night of Troy, where Aeneas, despite the divine command of Hector, fought desperately on

¹ *Aen.* i. 198 ff.

till all was lost, after the weary voyages and purposeless settlements dutifully undertaken in obedience to an undefined and forever retreating ideal, we read with new understanding the words of Aeneas' speech, and see again in the hero a man of brave deeds who encounters tragic calamity and—what is sometimes harder to bear—sickening deferment and the jests of brute chance. For all this, he can crush the deep woe of his heart, and hopefully push on to his goal.

But the moment of temptation is at hand, for Aeneas and Dido both. A very natural temptation it is for Aeneas, coming at the moment of extreme despair and after so many attempts to raise the walls of a new Troy. Might not the rising Carthage fulfil at once the oracle and his dream? And for Dido the temptation is both natural and fated. Before Aeneas half feels its presence, she has yielded to her sister's entreaties, to the god's influence, and to her own heart. Sin, the poet believes, is complete at the moment of decision; while Aeneas, like the shepherd who hits a doe with a random shaft, is still "unaware,"¹ she by mentally consenting has "given hope to her wavering heart, and loosed her chastity."² This is the same *pudor* to which she has sworn sacred allegiance in the speech given not many lines before. To Dido, too, belongs the guilt of the act, when on the day of the hunt the lovers meet, and Juno and the elements sanction the union as best they may.

No more cares Dido for appearance or report: no more does she brood a secret love. She calls it wedlock, and cloaks with this name her sin.³

Fame, that horrid monster of the feathered eyes, reports that Aeneas and Dido are wasting the long winter in riot, "heedless of their realms and bound by low desire."⁴ Thus speaks gossip, basely coloring the truth, but true to one part of it, for the poet himself speaks, a few lines later, of "lovers forgetful of their higher glory."⁵ Up to this point Virgil has betrayed by no word the feelings of Aeneas, but now we see that he, too, has yielded to passion and a change of purpose. He proceeds with his mission: he "founds towers and makes houses new,"⁶ but wears the while a cloak of Tyrian purple, the work of Dido's hands.

¹ *Nescius*, vs. 72.

³ Vss. 170 ff.

⁵ Vs. 221.

² Vs. 55.

⁴ Vs. 194.

⁶ Vss. 260 ff.

When the stern message comes from Jove, "Aeneas at the sight was dumb, his senses gone. . . . He longed to flee away and leave that lovely land, overwhelmed at such a warning, such mandate from the gods." His first thought was, how he should now approach the queen, what plea would win forgiveness and approval.¹ He orders his men to make ready in secret for sailing at a moment's notice.

He, meanwhile, since his good Dido knew it not, nor dreamed such love would be dissevered, would ponder the best chance of approach, what the time for gentle speaking, what mode of action most auspicious.

Two possible inferences may be drawn from this passage.² Perhaps this is a callous hero, or else a lay figure, a mere emblem of Roman destiny. But perhaps we may read in these lines what we have learned before of Aeneas. He is a man of deepest feeling, his passion has been intense, but in the face of such a revelation he masters himself in an instant. He sees his infidelity and in an instant resolves. Best to have done once for all with what was sin for them both. It cannot be a separation like that of Antony from Cleopatra, which

So abides and flies,
That thou, residing here, go'st yet with me,
And I, hence fleeting, here remain with thee.

Nor can Dido stand, as Lorenzo thought of her,

With a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage.

The parting must be brief and forever.

Certain recent critics have claimed that we have no right to find pathos in the story of Dido: this, it is said, is an intrusion of modern romanticism which ancient feeling would not have tolerated.

Nor, . . . though Virgil in his powerful picture of Dido's grief and despair arouses our sympathy for the forsaken heroine, need we suppose that such was his intention or such the effect upon Roman readers. For them and him Dido symbolized Carthage, as Aeneas symbolized Rome: and her fate, to Roman eyes, was only right, an echo of the old cry *delenda est Carthago*.³

¹ This is the meaning of *ambire*, vs. 283. The word is used of the politician, who 'solicits;' it is also used, as here, of the worshiper who implores. Some editors turn Virgil's tragedy into farce by translating literally, "get around."

² Vss. 279-95.

³ Papillon and Haigh, introduction to Book iv.

But ancient readers found pathos enough in similar narratives of Catullus and Ovid, and when Ovid assures us that the fourth *Aeneid* was the most popular part of the poem, we are clear that, whatever the truth of this statement, the readers whom he has in mind did not go to the story of Dido for political allegory. Nor did the youthful Augustine shed tears for finding such, nor is this why Macrobius includes a lengthy treatment of this book under the rubric of *pathos*. If the speech of Dido¹ in which *omnia tuta timens* she reproaches Aeneas for his intended cruelty, is not pathos, and intended pathos, then we had better look farther for a definition of this term. She begins by reproaching him for his base resolve to steal away from her, heedless of their love, his pledges, and the cruel death in store for her: by this she means that natural death which the slighted lover dies—but the reader knows the terrible meaning of the tragic irony. But if Aeneas must go, why should he brave a wintry sea? Such action she calls cruel—cruel to her and to himself. She implores him by her tears and his pledges, by their “wedlock just begun,” to pity her and save her from the surrounding foes, who will pour in at his departure. For his sake she had consented to shame. “To whom dost thou leave me to die, my guest? Since this name alone is all that is left from that of husband.” With a supreme appeal to the most sacred of human feelings, she laments that there will be no child to console her, no little Aeneas to bear his features and his name. “Then should I not seem utterly captive and forlorn.” The Dido of Ovid’s seventh *Heroid* invokes a curse on her betrayer, in that he may have left her with child, doubling his legacy of cruelty and shame. This bit of Ovid’s subtle characterization presents a prouder Dido, a scornful heroine: Virgil portrays for the moment the weak and loving woman.² “Thus she spoke. He, at Jove’s behest, bent firm his glance and struggling crushed the anguish in his heart.”³

Obnixus curam sub corde premebat:

These words show that we have inferred aright the meaning of

¹ Vss. 305 ff.

² This interpretation is the reverse of that given by Zielinski *Philologus* LXIV (1905) 17.

³ Vss. 331 f.

Aeneas' resolve when the warning came. The very phrasing recalls those words in which his character was first presented—*premit altum corde dolorem*:¹ we see again the man who deeply feels but is strong to control. Conington renders *curam* by "great love," but Virgil has not yet spoken so plainly; with supreme skill he heightens his final impression by gradual explicitness and growing intensity.

Aeneas replies, as he says, briefly. Conington well observes that his speech is actually longer than that of Dido: "but the words come slowly and with effort, and bear no comparison to what the lover would have said had he given away to his emotions." He begins by acknowledging the justice of her appeal to his protection:

I never will deny, O queen, that thou hast deserved of me a thousand-fold more than thy words can ever utter, nor shall I be loth to bethink me of Elissa, so long as my memory lasts and breath inspires this frame.

Surely these are heartless words, if they express all that Aeneas feels—an almost condescending esteem instead of the passion on which the two had fed—but they are tragic words for him as well as for her, if they crush deep anguish of spirit. He answers in a word her charge of base desertion; he had not meant to steal away, but, as the reader has seen, prepared for instant departure after his last words with her. "Nor did I hold the bridegroom's torch before me, or enter into such a covenant." These are the most cruel words of all, because the plain truth. But cruelty is the only kindness if the separation must be at once and irrevocable—and it is demanded by the fates. Aeneas has obeyed the will of heaven before against his own desire, else he never would have started on his weary quest; he would have built again the walls of his native Troy. But Italy, Italy—the words come ringing in like a *motif* in Wagner—is the predestined goal. "This is my love, and this my native land." And has she not a mission, too, a city to build? They both had been faithless to their ideals; may he not cherish an ideal as well as she? In visions of the night his father Anchises comes to reproach him; the sight of his boy Ascanius, whom he is robbing of his destiny, is a constant reproach. Now appears the messenger of the gods with a final command. So "cease to torture thee and me with thy complaints"—tears and sympathy would be the cruel course now. "To

¹ i, vs. 209.

Italy, not of my will, I follow on." These last words resume in brief compass the elements of the tragedy that confronts Aeneas: *Italiam*, his mission, *non sponte*, his love, *sequor* his resolution.

Those who object to what they deem the impassiveness of Virgil's hero should note that Dido in her retort makes precisely the same charge.¹ Rock-born she calls him, the nursling of tigers.

"Had he a sigh for my weeping? Turned he his eyes to me? Did he yield and shed tears? Did he pity her that loved him?"

Virgil, we see, was not blind to the opportunity. He might have evoked compassion from Aeneas at this moment—if he had chosen. And when Dido, kindling to the sense of her lover's ingratitude, scoffs, with just a touch of blasphemy, at his divine mission, proudly bids him go, and exults at the doom which she, as minister of the furies, will visit on him—when faint from such excess of feeling she is borne off by her attendants, Aeneas in anxiety for her,² can hold back passion no longer.

But loyal Aeneas, though he would fain soften her grief with words of consolation and assuage her cares, deeply grieving, his whole heart upheaved with his great love, fulfils for all that the mandates of the gods and again repairs to his fleet.

Amor—passion: that is the word that Virgil has not spoken till now.

After Dido's final appeal—the messages sent by Anna—Virgil gathers up in one simile the impressions made thus far in an ascending scale. We have learned of the hero's amazement and his fixed resolve at the moment of the revelation—*obmutuit*; we have seen that his outer calmness disguised deep anguish—*curam sub corde premebat*; he has made virtual confession to Dido that love is the fee exacted by obedience—*Italiam non sponte sequor*; finally the anguish that masters him is openly called love—*magnoque animum labefactus amore*. Allusive description and the gradual approach—these are methods characteristic of a peculiarly Virgilian quality, to which Mr. R. S. Conway has done justice in a recent paper,³ reticence and

¹ Vss. 365 ff.

² Vss. 390 f.: *multa metu cunctantem et multa parantem* | *dicere*. Some editors again stage this scene for comedy, seeing in *metu* "the dread of arousing her wrath still further."

³ "An Unnoticed Aspect of Virgil's Personality," *Proceedings of the English Classical Association*, 1907.

artistic reserve. It is perhaps the most fascinating and distinctive trait of Virgil's personality, one which his reader greets on page after page; it reveals in the written word the same impulse that prompted the shy poet to take refuge in the nearest doorway, when passers-by pointed him out in the streets of Rome.

After the last of Dido's messages, we are told—

He, though, is touched by no laments, nor is he pliant to hear her supplication. The fates oppose: God shut the hero's steadfast ears. And even as an oak, mighty with years of strength, now here, now there is tossed by the blasts of Alpine Boreas who struggles to uproot it—loud it creaks, and as its trunk is shaken, deep-piled leaves clutter the earth: the tree clings to the rocks, and as far as it stretches its crown into the higher air, so deep its roots toward Tartarus are stretching—even so the hero on this side and on that, bears the blows of entreaty and knows anguish in his great heart. His will abides unshaken; and tears are showered in vain.

I believe with St. Augustine and Servius against many editors from Heyne down, that these are the tears of Aeneas. They need not be for the point of Virgil's characterization, as this appears in the line preceding—*magno persentit pectore curas*. But these falling tears are to match the falling leaves—outer symbol of the inner stress; the simile is exact in all its parts. A modern commentator queries why tears of Aeneas should be *inanes*; "*iusta causa non apparet*" he remarks.¹ Incomprehensible certainly, granted a hero who has no cause for regret. But there is a battle on between Aeneas' emotions and his will.

One more passage in Book iv gives indications of the hero's feelings—a passage susceptible of gross misinterpretation. After those liquid lines on the calm of night,² brought in painful contrast with the anguish of the queen, it is said of Aeneas³ that "he, in his high ship, determined, now, on going, was plucking the flower of sleep, all being now in readiness." *Carpebat somnum*—enjoying sleep to the full. Is this a sign of heartlessness? Rather, after the anguish of his own struggle and the pain of his sympathy with Dido's grief, he gains that peace which succeeds a bitter fight, and

¹ Forbiger on vs. 449.

² Vss. 522 f.

³ Vss. 554 f.

yields to his exhaustion when all has been done that he can do—*iam certus eundi, rebus iam rite paratis*.¹

It would be easy to cite throughout the narrative of the fourth book, and especially toward the end, the various bits of incident or description by which Virgil suggests that the external setting, the scenic adornment of the story is that of the tragic stage.² These details would mean little, however, if the inner plot were not of the essence of tragedy, as it is. It brings us face to face with the ancient motive of the Greek drama, the conflict between human will and an overruling fate; tragedy lies in the bitter conclusion that the actors, though pursuing right paths, or at least natural paths, run into disaster despite themselves. They cannot be villains, else tragedy would not purge the emotions with the thrill of pity and fear, but merely awaken indignation and suggest an obvious remedy—the slaying of the villain. Not that the actors need be spotless. We demand not a triumphant, logical insight into every move in the ethics of the narrative, but pity and fear at the calamities of creatures like ourselves, involved in the play of forces passing their control. Both Aeneas and Dido are faithless to an absolute moral standard and their own ideals, but their infidelity is so natural, almost irresistible, that we are ready to condone.

Si fuit errandum, causas habet error. Thus Dido pleads for herself in Ovid's *Heroid*, and Virgil, too, acquits her in his closing words

*nec fato merita nec morte peribat,
sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore.*

Dante acquits her by placing her at the entrance of the Inferno, not in the seventh circle of the lower hell. Aeneas' yielding to so reasonable a temptation at the moment of utter dejection is pardonable too; many a reader will allow that, who cannot pardon his return to duty, who does not see that his struggle with his heart-

¹ Lucan has a similar situation at the beginning of his third book. Pompey, sailing away from his foes at Brundisium, "*Solus ab Hesperia non flexit lumina terra* until the last speck of land has passed from view—*dum dubios cernit vanescere montes*. Not till then *soporifero cesserunt languida somno | membra ducis*. So too the sleep of Ariadne and of Andromeda as described by Propertius 1. 3. 1 ff. In fact we are dealing here with a traditional motive in both literature and art.

² A point well illustrated by N. W. DeWitt in *Classical Journal*, II, 283 ff.

shaking emotions and his mastery of them are as tragic for him as for Dido. His passion and hers, natural and condoned, clash with the purpose of a righteous and irresistible fate. This makes the tragedy. No other ending could be conceived save that which Virgil gives; Aeneas must sail away. George Meredith, with a strikingly similar plot in his *Lord Ormont*, ends in revolt and—a curious consequence—banality: his Aeneas stays in Carthage and “throws his sceptre at the injurious gods.” But Virgil is writing tragedy.

[*To be continued*]